

Can We Withstand the Divine Gaze?

by Rebecca Bynum (March 2014)

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.

– John the Baptist (Matthew 3:11)

Those who were baptized by John were not doing it for themselves alone but for the Jewish nation as a whole. They believed that to repent of their own sins would help bring about the salvation of their people, that spiritual progress for all was dependant on the progress of each. Whether true or not, there is no doubt this manner of thinking animated the founding of America as well – a people spiritually cleansed, who could perceive and follow the divine leading and thus bless the whole world by example – this too was the animating spirit of the early settlers. Americans once commonly thought of themselves as a nation of repentant sinners, but also a nation which welcomed divine scrutiny.

For each person, once the decision is made to turn toward God, the Father's searching gaze lights all the hidden places of his soul. His light cannot be blocked, nor can we steel ourselves against it, nor turn away in shame. Sins, once buried, are now revealed to full consciousness. Alchemists often spoke of the burning away of the dross from the gold, and if they spoke in metaphor, then there were talking of spiritual cleansing – a cleansing with fire – the light which brings pain.

Sins of commission, sins of omission, sins of thought, sins of word, sins of deed or no deed. All those things we should or shouldn't have done, thought or said, every past regret is lit up and revealed, exposed to our consciousness and to our spirit Father, a lifetime of mistakes brought vividly back to life. And yet we must be cleansed of this sin in our souls, or how could our souls follow the Father's good spirit back into the heavenly realms from whence he comes? Of course we cannot make ourselves worthy anymore than we can cleanse ourselves of sin, but we can allow this painful baptism. We can allow the Father to bring those shameful memories to our minds and remind us how far we have to go.

Of man it is required that he turn away from his bestial nature. Animals cannot do so, only man is thus endowed. So at times we must experience regret, and be filled with sorrowful remorse over our sins. We are more than flesh and bone; we are indwelt by a living spirit who gives us this choice – the choice to be more than we are – the choice to leave animal impulse and selfish desire behind. We may draw a little closer to the reality of the person our Father wants us to be – the person he created us to become.

*And my tears, make a heavenly Lethean flood,
And drown in it my sins' black memory.
That thou remember them, some claim as debt;
I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget.*

– John Donne

Does the Father forget our sins when we enter the next life, and in his mercy perhaps, allow us to forget them as well? Would the good Father bring the torments of hell into our heavenly estate? This thought makes it even more imperative to experience true repentance here and now, however painful or difficult it might be. The eternal goal is worth any price.

Gaining entrance into the heavenly kingdom cannot be effortless; for if it were, this life would be rendered meaningless. We have been created in an imperfect state with the ability to gradually become more perfect through self understanding, self-control and moral choice. The intelligent person knows what he is doing, why he is doing it, where he is going and how he will get there. In order for virtue to be cultivated, therefore, one must be able to distinguish a goal. Without that eternal goal, man is left without direction and even if moral motives are cultivated for their own sake, they easily evaporate under pressure, which is something secular humanists often fail to contemplate.

Virtue is a living experience, it is the experience of progress in attuning one's life and will with the higher mind and will of the cosmos. It is the experience of increasing internal harmony, balance and sense of proportion. One may readily observe the effect of this effort to remove man's eternal goal from the modern world – maturity is in desperately short supply. Duty cannot be perceived in the absence of moral insight and without a sense of duty, loyalty to a higher ideal, mankind quickly degenerates to something like a clever beast – all moral striving is lost. Today the basest immorality is celebrated in our ubiquitous entertainments.

Science, in its attempt to substitute for religion, offers nothing more than a string of proclamations exclaiming: "The end is near" These come in two varieties: "It's all your fault" (therefore you deserve to suffer) and "There is nothing you can do about it" (suffering will

not atone – nothing will). Both are equally disastrous for the development of children, but it seems the best we can do is to continue to stress “scientific education” as the answer to all our ills. We are succeeding only in inculcating our young people with a messianic environmental fanaticism, or in giving them a sheer sense of hopelessness which they immediately drown out with entertainment or drugs or both. These are our future civilization builders. What manner of civilization will they build?

Nothing can replace the inborn yearning for God. And as much as men like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins might wish it to be, that yearning cannot be educated away. Man needs an unmovable star toward which his efforts may always be tending. Human beings will never stop needing God or stop yearning to experience the divine gaze, however painful that searching gaze may be. “Help me Father, for I have sinned,” is a universal human cry.

The great question before us now is whether our nation, which once experienced complete certainty of divine favor, can now withstand the divine gaze. Have we squandered our God-given promise so soon? Is there no turning back from the precipice where we find ourselves? Someday perhaps, a new John the Baptist will rise up and say: “the way is hard, the choices are painful, but we can do no other. Our mistakes and regrets cannot and should not be forgotten here on earth. We must learn from them and accept the harsh consequences of our errors, but these will be forgotten in eternity. Repent, but also rejoice, for there is one who will show us the way. We are not lost.”

Rebecca Bynum's latest book is